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AUTHOR Etaugh, Claire; Poertner, Patricia
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ABSTRACT

The labor force participation of women with young children has increased dramatically in recent years, stimulating research concerning how perceptions of a woman's competence and personality are affected by her employment and family roles. A rating instrument containing 24 7-point bipolar scales administered to a group of 224 college students evaluated personality and performance characteristics of 16 women described as married or divorced mothers, employed or formerly employed in either a high- or low-status occupation. Ratings for each scale were analyzed using four-way analyses of variance. Results indicated that the students evaluated mothers who were married, employed, and in high status occupations more favorably than those who were divorced, not employed, and in low-status occupations. Results are tabulated and references are included. (TE)

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Effects of Occupational Prestige, Employment Status and Marital Status on Perceptions of Mothers

Claire Etaugh and Patricia Poertner
Bradley University

Abstract

College students evaluated personality and performance characteristics of women described as married or divorced mothers, employed or formerly employed in either a high- or low-status occupation. Mothers who were married, employed, and in high-status occupations were evaluated more favorably than those who were divorced, nonemployed, and in low-status occupations, respectively.

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PRESENTED AT THE MEETING OF THE MIDWESTERN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, CHICAGO, MAY 1989.

A. Title: Effects of occupational prestige, employment status, and marital status on perceptions of mothers

B. Area: Psychology of women; personality and social behavior

C. Problem:

The labor force participation of women with young children has increased dramatically in recent years, stimulating research concerning how perceptions of a woman's competence and personality are affected by her employment and family roles. The research to date (e.g. Bridges, 1987; Etaugh & Petroski, 1985) has focused on perceptions of women in high-status careers (e.g. counseling psychology, pharmacy, economics). The majority of women, however, are concentrated in low-paying relatively low-status service, clerical and sales occupations (U.S. Department of Labor, 1984). To learn more about how the majority of working mothers are viewed, we studied how women in less prestigious jobs are perceived relative to those in higher-status jobs.

D. Procedure:

College students (128 females and 96 males) evaluated a briefly described stimulus person on 24 7-point bipolar scales which described personality traits and job performance characteristics. Each subject rated one of 16 women described as either a divorced or married mother, either employed or formerly employed in an occupation of high or low social status. Based on pilot data, four sex-neutral occupations, two high-status and two low-status, were selected. Ratings for each scale were analyzed using four-way analyses of variance.

E. Results:

As indicated in Table 1, occupational prestige was a significant main effect on 13 of 24 scales. Mothers in high-status positions were rated as more competitive, dedicated to career, professionally competent, successful in job, influential, intelligent, independent,

reliable, stable, secure, happy, personally satisfied, and sensitive to others' needs. Employment status was a significant main effect on 10 scales. Employed mothers were perceived as more competitive, dedicated to career, successful in job, professionally competent, independent and attractive than nonemployed mothers, but as less sensitive to others' needs, affectionate, dedicated to family and unselfish. Marital status was a significant effect on 8 scales. Married women were viewed as more responsible, happy, secure, dependent, stable, relaxed, dedicated to career, and successful in job. Female subjects generally gave more favorable ratings than males. Few significant interactions emerged.

F. Conclusions and Implications:

As expected, mothers with high-status jobs were rated more favorably on personality and job performance traits than were mothers with lower-status jobs. Interestingly, however, employment and marital status had the same effect on perceptions of mothers regardless of the social status of their occupations. Employed mothers in both low-and high-status positions were viewed as more occupationally competent but as less nurturant than their formerly employed counterparts. Likewise, married mothers, whether in low- or high-status jobs, received more favorable personality evaluations than divorced mothers. Implications of these findings are discussed.

References

Bridges, J.S. (1987). College females' perceptions of adult roles and occupational fields for women. Sex Roles, 16, 591-604.

Etaugh, C., & Petroski, B. (1985). Perceptions of women: Effects of employment status and marital status. Sex Roles, 12, 329-339.

U.S. Department of Labor (1984). Facts on women workers. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.

Table 1. F Values and Mean Ratings for Items as a Function of Employment Status, Marital Status, Occupational Prestige, and Sex of Subject

ITEM (Left Pole)	EMPLOYMENT STATUS			MARITAL STATUS			OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE			SEX OF SUBJECT		
	F	Employed	Nonemployed	F	Married	Divorced	F	High	Low	F	Female	Male
Responsible	.63	2.52	2.66	9.47[b]	2.31	2.87	3.56	2.42	2.76	3.42	2.45	2.78
Selfish	8.94[b]	4.88	5.43	.34	5.21	5.10	.46	5.21	5.09	2.02	5.27	5.00
Competitive	10.04[b]	3.67	4.30	.05	3.96	4.01	14.39[c]	3.61	4.37	.02	4.00	3.97
Unhappy	.75	4.43	4.58	24.43[c]	4.94	4.07	7.29[b]	4.74	4.27	2.52	4.63	4.34
Secure	2.97	3.34	3.67	33.85[c]	2.95	4.06	9.15[b]	3.21	3.79	1.88	3.39	3.66
Dedicated to Career	128.08[c]	3.24	5.55	4.22[a]	4.19	4.61	26.14[c]	3.88	4.92	3.39	4.23	4.61
Insen. to Needs of Others	6.34[b]	5.22	5.67	1.01	5.54	5.36	6.34[b]	5.67	5.22	1.71	5.55	5.31
Great Personal Satisfaction	1.57	3.79	3.52	2.51	3.48	3.82	7.13[b]	3.37	3.94	1.48	3.54	3.80
Unstable	2.42	4.97	4.69	23.67[c]	5.28	4.38	15.15[c]	5.19	4.47	.13	4.86	4.79
Friendly	.03	3.00	3.03	1.90	2.90	3.13	.68	3.08	2.95	6.98[b]	2.83	3.26
Tense	.90	3.94	4.10	11.42[c]	4.30	3.73	1.35	4.12	3.92	.16	4.05	3.98
Dependent	4.24[a]	4.88	4.38	5.92[b]	4.34	4.92	15.45[c]	5.10	4.16	4.30[a]	4.84	4.34
Affectionate	5.67[b]	3.03	2.62	.87	2.74	2.90	.04	2.84	2.80	1.13	2.74	2.93
Unintelligent	1.86	5.05	4.84	2.53	5.07	4.82	84.75[c]	5.67	4.22	5.20[a]	5.10	4.74
Prof. Compet.	9.86[b]	3.09	3.70	.01	3.40	3.38	57.37[c]	2.66	4.13	.46	3.34	3.47
Likable	.34	2.96	3.05	1.23	2.91	3.10	1.01	2.92	3.09	4.38[a]	2.85	3.21
Unreliable	1.81	5.24	5.01	3.46	5.29	4.96	8.99[b]	5.38	4.87	11.88[c]	5.38	4.78
Pers. Adj. Prob.	.14	4.65	4.59	3.08	4.77	4.47	.48	4.68	4.56	5.89[b]	4.80	4.39
Success in Job	20.11[c]	3.03	3.91	4.53[a]	3.26	3.68	10.94[c]	3.14	3.79	1.01	3.38	3.58
Uninfluential	.67	4.16	4.30	.26	4.28	4.19	19.38[c]	4.62	3.85	11.86[c]	4.49	3.89
Ded. to Family	27.95[c]	3.04	1.88	.38	2.39	2.53	.49	2.38	2.54	.67	2.38	2.56
Unattractive	4.15[a]	4.52	4.26	.01	4.39	4.38	.40	4.43	4.35	3.04	4.48	4.26
Comfort.w/ Others	.60	2.97	3.12	2.69	2.89	3.20	2.09	2.91	3.18	2.65[b]	2.91	3.22
Unsociable	1.28	4.88	4.67	3.31	4.94	4.61	1.07	4.87	4.68	8.37[b]	5.00	4.47

NOTE: The left pole of each item was presented in the order shown above. Lower scores indicate ratings toward left pole. Thus, when the favorable pole is on the left, lower scores indicate more favorable ratings, and vice versa. df = 1, 208

[a] $p < .05$

[b] $p < .01$

.001